

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Motivation

Among the four language skills, listening is regarded as the most important but also the most neglected skill. Although listening plays a critical role in language, it remains the least explored and understood (Buck, 2001; Morley, 1991) owing to its fleeting nature and illusive mental and cognitive process experienced by listeners.

In a classroom setting, listening to instructors or peers probably accounts for the majority of class time. Without adequate listening proficiency, students are unable to understand or even interact, and thus they may be left anxious, frustrated and demotivated.

Despite the significance of listening, it was not until the late 1940 that the recognition and then inquiry of listening was made by “fathers of listening,” James Brown, Ralph Nichols, and Carl Weaver (Feyten, 1991). Likewise, in the second language teaching and learning context, listening gained its recognition at a considerably slow pace. The changing wind and shifting sand of teaching approaches to second language witness the development of second language listening. As summarized by Flowerdew and Miller (2005), within a grammar-translation framework, listening is completely ignored. According to the direct-method approach, despite the all-time use of the target language, listening is not taught, either. The focus of the audio-lingual approach lies in the manipulation of structures rather than listening in contexts. Nevertheless, later according to the communicative approach, the task-based approach, the learner-strategy approach, and the integrated approach, there is a greater possibility for learners to practice and strategically utilize the listening skill. Therefore, Brown (2000) fittingly concluded, “Over the last twenty years, ELT has forged a consensus on the importance of developing listening skills”

(p.1).

In spite of the perceived weight of listening, the actual classroom practice and instruction time devoted to it is far from satisfactory. In a survey conducted by Bern (1998), only 51.4 % of college instructors frequently tested listening comprehension despite the fact that 98.6 % of the respondents considered listening comprehension important. In exam-oriented Taiwan, because the Basic Competency Test and the college entrance exam do not incorporate listening, the inevitable washback effect is that many teachers just leave students alone in expectation of their enhancing this skill gradually and that most of the students virtually give up listening. Thus it is not surprising that listening is nicknamed “Cinderella” by Flowerdew and Miller (2005).

The labyrinth of listening process has been discussed by quite a few researchers (Buck, 2001; Murphy, 1991; O’Malley, Chamot, & Kupper, 1989; Rost, 2002; Rubin, 1994; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). O’Malley, Chamot, and Kupper (1989) maintained that “listening comprehension is an active and conscious process in which the listener constitutes meaning by using cues from contextual information and from existing knowledge” (p. 434). Furthermore, Rubin (1994) stated, “For second language/foreign language learners, listening is the skill that makes the heaviest processing demands because learners must store information in short term memory at the same time as they are working to understand the information” (p. 8). Buck (2001) also proposed that “listening comprehension is a process, a very complex process,” because such a process allows listeners’ intelligence, personality, purposes, feelings, knowledge, current thoughts, and past experience to interplay with the acoustic input so as to create understanding and interpretation of the text. It has been found that such a complicated process as listening is most likely to provoke learners’ affective response.

As a senior high school teacher in Taiwan, the researcher discovers that listening

is barely “taught,” not to mention the fact that listeners’ affective domain, anxiety, is seldom investigated and then addressed by instructors. The most widespread listening practice is simply “testing” listening. Anyone taking a closer look at the mushrooming listening tests on the market will find that among the widely accepted text types are single statements, conversations, and short talks. Whether different text types, which involve different listening process and demand various listening skills, interplay with listeners’ anxiety degree remains unknown. Therefore, as a researcher and practitioner, the writer intends to address the issue of the potentially intricately intertwined relationship among learners’ anxiety, listening performance, strategy use, and text types of listening comprehension tests.

## **1.2 Significance of the Present Study**

First, the examination of listeners’ anxiety and listening performance can help teachers detect those highly anxious students and ineffective listeners at an earlier stage, thus giving them timely help. To be more specific, once teachers and test writers make clear the relationship between students’ different anxiety degrees and their performance on question types, classroom activities and listening exercise can be tailor-made for different groups of students.

Second, the exploration of listeners’ anxiety degree and listening text types will assist language instructors in specifying students’ listening difficulty and then teachers can handle learners’ problems relatively with ease.

Third, the investigation of strategy use by students at different anxiety levels is to offer insights into what strategy types is popular with students of varied anxiety degree. Therefore, teachers can incorporate strategy training into teaching material design and possibly stretch students’ strategy use and elevate their listening performance.

Finally, the discovery of overall listening strategy use of (un)successful listeners with different degrees of anxiety can shed light on the effective strategies applicable to different students and benefit teachers, curriculum designers as well as students in strategy teaching and learning. It is hoped that the present study can provide researchers, language teachers, textbook writers, and students with a better understanding of anxiety, EFL listening performance, listening text types, and strategy use.

### **1.3 Theoretical Background**

Overall, listeners' performance is influenced by their own idiosyncrasy as well as the characteristics of listening comprehension tests (Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Boyle, 1984; Elkhafafi, 2005; Oxford, 1990; Rubin, 1994; Vogely, 1998; Young, 1991).

To begin with, language learners' characteristics, such as their anxiety level (Elkhafafi, 2005; Vogely, 1998; Young, 1991) and their strategy use, (Oxford, 1990) play an essential role in their listening performance. Although the majority of the research has been centered on the relationship between anxiety and general language performance/ proficiency (cf. Backman, 1976; Chastain, 1975; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; Macintyre, 1995; Phillips, 1992; Swain & Burnaby, 1976; Ying, 1993), sporadic studies on listeners' anxiety have been reported by a few researchers (Arnold, 2000; Elkhafafi, 2005; Vogely, 1998; Young, 1991). Most of the findings suggested there was an inverse relationship between anxiety and language learning (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Ying, 1993), while some indicated that anxiety enhanced language performance (Kleinmann, 1977; Scovel, 1978) or that no relationship was found between anxiety and language performance (Pimsleur & Andrew, 1962; Westcott, 1973 cited in Young, 1991). However, the reports on

listening anxiety presented that listening anxiety negatively correlated with listening performance (Elkhafafi, 2005) and that the reduction of listening anxiety contributed to better listening performance (Arnold, 2000).

On the whole, language strategy use is classified into three major categories: social strategies (e.g. turning to others for help), cognitive strategies (e.g. associating with listeners' background knowledge), and metacognitive strategies (e.g. paying attention to the main idea). More specifically, Oxford (1990) proposed a taxonomy on strategies which separated direct strategies from indirect strategies. Direct strategies were the behaviors associated with direct use of language, inclusive of memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and comprehension strategies<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, indirect strategies facilitated language learning without direct manipulation of the language, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies<sup>2</sup> included. Likewise, Rubin (1994) held that listeners, when actively processing the input, might adopt two types of listening strategies, cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies. Concerning strategies adopted by effective listeners, there has been agreement on the strategies associated with successful listeners (Rost, 2002; Vandergrift, 1996 & 1999). The commonly known effective strategies are predicting (predicting information prior to listening), inferencing (making inferences based on inadequate information), monitoring, clarifying, responding, and evaluating.

In addition to listeners' characteristics, the nature of listening comprehension tests can also influence listeners' performance, such as text characteristics, task characteristics, purpose of listening, and the context where listening takes place (Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Rubin, 1994). Among these factors, text types have been

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<sup>1</sup> Memory strategy is to store information in memory for later retrieval. Cognitive strategy is to manipulate and process information. Comprehension strategy is to make up the inadequacy in existing knowledge (Oxford, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Metacognitive strategy is for planning and organizing information. Affective strategy is for dealing with emotions and attitudes. Social strategy is for learning with others (Oxford, 1990).

found to be significant in learners' listening comprehension (Chen & Luo, 2001; Cheng, 2000; Kitao & Kitao, 1996; Luo, 2005; Rost & Ross, 1991; Shohamy & Inbar, 1991; Wu, 2000). In the present study, the writer intends to discuss three of the most widely used text types: statements, conversations, and short talks. Firstly, statements have been claimed to have the advantages of being more communicative and easy to administer (Kitao & Kitao, 1996) whereas their disadvantages lie in their lack of contextual clues and requiring listeners not only to understand but also to respond (Kitao & Kitao, 1996; Wu et al., 1999; Yang, 1995). Secondly, dialogues, despite their simpler sentence structures and real-life contexts, have been considered harder and more complicated than statements because listeners have to pay attention to the connections between utterances and interactions between speakers (Sohamy & Inbar, 1991; Wu et al., 1999; Yen, 1987). Thirdly, short talks can be considerably difficult especially when they are prewritten and involved no interaction between listeners and speakers (Sohamy & Inbar, 1991).

In spite of the great abundance of findings on language anxiety and language strategies, the interplay among listeners' anxiety, overall listening performance, listening performance on different text types, and strategy use remains unexplored. Therefore, this study aims at investigating effects of anxiety on listeners on these aspects and it is hoped that the findings can help teachers cope with listeners' anxiety better in different listening contexts.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

The present study aims at addressing the following research questions:

1. Is anxiety related to senior high school students' listening performance? If yes, is it more related to global or local questions?
2. How does anxiety affect senior high school students' performance on

different listening text types?

3. What are the common listening strategy types used by students at different anxiety levels?
4. What is the overall strategy use of (un)successful listeners with different degrees of anxiety in taking a listening comprehension test?

### **1.5 Terms Used in the Thesis**

The terms used in the present study are defined as follows.

#### **1. Anxiety**

Anxiety is “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process.” (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986, p. 128) In the present study, anxiety is believed to be revealed through several mental and physical aspects, such as listeners’ response to English listening, their self-perception as listeners, and their attitude toward listening to English.

#### **2. Text Types**

Text types are based on the characteristics of listening texts. Listening texts, which refer to the aural passages students hear in taking listening tests, are commonly classified according to the length and the number of speakers involved (Dirven & Taylor, 1985; Dunkel et al., 1993). This study concerns three text types: statements, conversations, and short talks. Statements are sentences of short length produced by a speaker. Conversations involve two or more speakers, when they have interpersonal talks using more explicit language and simple sentence structures. Short talks are monologues with relatively lengthy passage compared to statements.

#### **3. Learner Strategies**

Strategies are the conscious behaviors language learners use to facilitate their

“acquisition, storage, retention, recall, and use of new information” (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990, p.312). The present study adopts Oxford’s (1990) taxonomy on strategies, which are classified into two categories, direct strategies and indirect strategies. Direct strategies refer to the behaviors related to direct use of language, such as memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies. Indirect strategies indicate language learning without direct manipulation of the language, like metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies.

## **1.6 Organization of the Thesis**

This thesis is organized as follows. In Chapter Two, the researcher first reviews the literature regarding issues in listening performance, which centers on anxiety, question type, text type, and strategy use. Later, four related studies of language anxiety are reviewed (Elkhafafi, 2005; Ganschow et al., 1994; Phillips, 1992; Vogely, 1998). In Chapter Three, the research design and results of a pilot study are presented. In Chapter Four, the researcher elaborates on findings and discussions. Finally, Chapter Five concludes the major results and introduces the implications and limitations of the study along with suggestions for future research.